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“AUTHENTIC SISTERS”: H.D. AND MARGARET CRAVENS

Robert Spoo

In May 1912 H.D. left London for Paris in a state of emotional exhaustion. London had grown unbearable to her ever since the visit in late April of Frances Gregg and her new husband, Louis Wilkinson, with its humiliating conclusion. The couple had invited H.D. to accompany them on a honeymoon excursion to Brussels, but Ezra Pound, disapproving of the irregularity of the plan, bullied her into withdrawing at the last minute. As H.D. wrote years later in “Autobiographical Notes,” “I arrange to go, but E cuts across, says F has a chance to be happy, but if I go, it will complicate things.”¹ Coming on top of the trauma of Frances’ sudden flight into married respectability, Pound’s raging possessiveness proved too much for H.D., and she departed for Paris about the first of May, alone. Her decision to stay by herself in a city that had daunted and depressed her the year before is some measure of her need to escape London. On 9 May 1912 she wrote F. S. Flint from a pension in the rue Jacob: “I have been wanting to write but too confused!”²

Richard Aldington came over to join her about the middle of May; “Richard has come!” exclaims her diary for May 15.³ But her confusion persisted, despite Aldington’s encouragement and the gradual return of her creative energies under the influence of Parisian art and architecture. Towards the end of May, H.D. began confiding sonnets to her diary. Rarely did she complete one, and even those that have the requisite fourteen lines are gappy or unconsummated in some way. Each is an exquisite fragment, like the Venus de Milo which H.D. spent many hours worshipping in the Louvre. One poem, sketched beneath the dateline May 31, takes a Paris rainstorm for its theme and ends with a gust of anguished questions: “Would I were quiet but what peace is there / For all this mesh of nerves that frets and turns.” And again on the next page: “Is there no quiet nor peace anywhere.”

As H.D. composed these lines, another American expatriate living in Paris, a woman of the Right Bank named Margaret Cravens, had all but concluded her own search for peace. Cravens was born in 1881 into a wealthy banking family in

Madison, Indiana. Little is known about her life before 1905, when she left for Europe to pursue her musical studies. In 1907 she went to Paris to study piano with such notable figures as Maurice Ravel and Harold Bauer, and she may also have worked with her friend Walter Rummel, the American pianist and composer, who in 1910 introduced her to Ezra Pound. By 1912 she had become frustrated by her lack of progress as a musician, and physical ailments made it difficult for her to keep up her intense study of piano and modern languages. She was finding it more and more fatiguing to entertain her large circle of friends, which included Pound and Rummel, the musician Thérèse Chaigneau, the author Louise Morgan Sill, and other artists and writers. She had other worries as well. Her father had recently shot and killed himself in Madison, Indiana. (Other members of her family had also chosen suicide.) And on May 27, 1912, Cravens turned thirty-one. Still unmarried, she increasingly felt the unreality and inconsequence of her artistic life in a foreign city. Her friends Rummel and Pound provided encouragement and stability, but she had recently learned of their engagements—Pound to Dorothy Shakespear, and Rummel to Thérèse Chaigneau. Cravens depended heavily on these men (especially Pound) and no doubt feared losing them, and there is evidence that she cared romantically for Rummel, and perhaps for Pound as well. Her sense of personal worthlessness, always a latent worry, now overwhelmed her.

On the morning of Saturday, June 1, she wrote farewell notes to Pound and Rummel, explaining to the latter that "I am going away for a rest there is no tragedy no ugliness."⁴ She went out later that day to attend a tea party with some friends in Passy and returned around 8 p.m. to her apartment off the Champs Elysées. After arranging the notes on her piano, she went into the bedroom, closed the door, and shot herself through the heart.

H.D. came to know Cravens about a month before the suicide. She met her soon after arriving in Paris, perhaps at the urging of Pound, who had also come to Paris around the first of May (separately from H.D.). It is possible that the two women had already met the previous year during H.D.'s first visit to Paris, as suggested in her unpublished autobiographical novel "Asphodel," in which Cravens figures as Shirley Thornton. Even if this was the case, the acquaintance did not deepen until the second trip, during which H.D. apparently visited Cravens several times at her Right Bank apartment, at least once with Aldington and Pound. Cravens even proved to be a friend in need. In "Autobiographical Notes," H.D. remarks that "Margaret, Ezra's friend, gets me out of the rue Jacob pension, where Louise Skidmore had sent me. I go to a hotel room." This hotel seems to have been on or near the rue des

Ciseaux, not far from the rue Jacob, for in her diary for May 26 H.D. wrote, "My rue des Ciseaux windows at irregular intervals [are] banked with straggly flower pots."⁵

H.D.'s "Asphodel," written in 1921-22, provides a rare glimpse of her brief friendship with Margaret Cravens. To read H.D.'s autobiographical writings for biographical revelations can be a risky undertaking, but I have found that "Asphodel" is consistently reliable in its portrayal of Cravens, judging by what is known of the final month of her life. When Hermione (the H.D. figure) first encounters Shirley Thornton, she beholds a woman closely resembling Cravens in photographs: "Shirley Thornton standing in the full glare of May day splendour looked thin, peaked, the right sort of clothes, a hat shading her almond shaped eyes."⁶ Shirley is "kind . . . [q]uite kind," but at times she grows bizarrely distracted, her eyes "wide, staring, glassy like a crystal gazer's."⁷

When this strange mood comes upon Shirley while she is discussing the recent engagements of George Lowndes (Ezra Pound) and Walter Dowel (Walter Rummel), Hermione suddenly recognizes in her acquaintance's panic and desolation something she herself has felt: "Was she a spectator then? Was she to be always looking, watching, seeing other people's lives work out right? Hermione seemed to herself suddenly forgotten. As old maids must feel turning out lavender letters, letters gone dim and smelling of sweet lavender. Was she then lost?"⁸ Though five years younger than Cravens, H.D. seems to have feared that she too was an "odd" woman (an adjective consistently applied to Shirley), that her artistic drives and unfocused expatriation barred her from the roles that 'normal' women embraced gladly. H.D. saw in Margaret Cravens the price that society exacts from its female bohemians. Her decision to marry Richard Aldington (Jerrold Darrington in the novel) may have been influenced by Cravens's fate.⁹

Shirley Thornton's "crystal gazer's" eyes link her to such vulnerable mystics as Joan of Arc and Cassandra, figures that have a special fascination for Hermione: "She should have married. Then it would have been all right. Then she wouldn't have been a virgin, gone mad, simply, like Cassandra."¹⁰ In H.D.'s view, these odd women were brutally punished by male-dominated societies intolerant of gifted, eccentric female 'seers.' H.D.'s 1912 diary reveals a similar preoccupation with female sensitivity and male cruelty: "The more delicate a thing is the more frail its sense of touch—the ease to lay itself open to hurt—malicious from without" (May 26). A gendarme speaks rudely to her and Aldington and she is devastated: "All the sweet straining reach toward Love and the daring to feed white, white fire with texture of flesh—and touch of finger—seemed shattered. . . . It seems all Gods were poised

against us" (May 26). She thought she had escaped Ezra Pound and his surly commands, yet here he was again, swaggering this time in a policeman's uniform, ranting away and spoiling intimacy. Again and again, H.D. longed for a sense of certainty and invulnerability that would put her beyond the reach of hurt, and she admired the Venus de Milo's placid power: "O Gods of Greece! She stands, untouched—nor does prayer move her—nor yearning—nor manifold humilities. . . . She gazes with eyes 'indifferent' " (May 22). This potent female gaze only superficially resembles the pained, faraway stare of Shirley Thornton.

H.D. learned of Cravens' death before Pound did (who had left Paris in late May on a walking tour of French troubadour country) and possibly even before Walter Rummel and his friends. Cravens had announced a tea party for the afternoon of Sunday, June 2, and invited several friends, including H.D., who arrived at the apartment late and was met by an unaccountably silent, glowering maid. H.D. described the moment years later: "I had been especially unnerved as I had gone that afternoon expecting to have tea with her and the maid had said: '*Mademoiselle est morte,*'—just like that."¹¹ In "Asphodel," Hermione's first reaction to the news is disbelief: "Shirley wasn't dead. It was impossible. There were a thousand things she might have said to her. Shirley with eyes gone wide like a crystal gazer's. Hermione had suspected something terrible."¹²

Later that day, H.D. and Aldington saw Walter Rummel at his fiancée's house, as H.D. recalled in "Autobiographical Notes": "We go to Thérèse Chaigneau's pretty house, outside Paris. . . . A note comes to Walter Rummel from M after her death, saying he was the person she loved, not Elzra, as Rummel declared." This was Cravens' long suicide note to Rummel.¹³ "Asphodel" describes the sorrow and guilt of Shirley's friends on that Sunday evening; the narrative, reflecting Hermione's anguished point of view, proceeds by accusing each of the characters of "killing" Shirley. For example, Walter Dowel's self-absorbed artistic mastery is responsible: "It was detached power that had killed Shirley. Walter simply."¹⁴ George Lowndes and even Véréne Raigneau (Thérèse Chaigneau) are guilty. Finally, Hermione turns on herself: "It was Hermione who had killed her. Hermione on May day might have reached her. Shirley looking wan and odd, seeing that Hermione was unhappy. Shirley had seen this. Hermione might have reached across, said simply, 'I am so unhappy.' Hermione hadn't done this. Hermione had killed her."¹⁵ Hermione realizes how alike she and Shirley were, how much they had in common as odd expatriate women, and laments the missed opportunity to aid and comfort "this authentic sister, tangled in a worse web than she was."¹⁶

H.D. began two sonnets to "M.L.C." (Margaret Lanier Cravens) in her diary for June 2, 1912. One of them describes an unnamed male's distress at sensing the presence of Cravens' "restless Soul." The second sonnet is more fragmentary but pursues a similar theme:

Our friend's friend—we could claim you nothing more
 We chattered in your room of books & chaffed.
 Our friend leafed over folios & laughed
 At serious book stuff & printed score.

We never passed you in the street but when
 After that day asunder in a wide
 Dark passage between street & boulevard
 He seemed to gaze into your self, he said.

No face, no form, only bewildered blind
 He knew your presence from a tortured place.
 I ask now seeking naught nor ---- of dread.

The poem captures a male friend's (or it may be two different men's) contrasting attitudes before and after the suicide ("after that day asunder"). Lighthearted, patronizing, even rude before the tragedy, afterwards "he" is sobered, recognizing Cravens' true "self" as he refused to do when she was alive.¹⁷ It is possible that this poem (recorded on the page opposite the first sonnet and hence not directly under the June 2 dateline) was written some days after June 2 and that "Our friend's friend" is Ezra Pound, who learned the sad news in Limoges and returned to Paris around June 8 or 9.

But the attempt to pinpoint individuals in these sonnets may be misleading. The identity of the "he" in both poems is ambiguous and, given the number of people affected by the suicide and the intensity of their feelings, possibly overdetermined. Pound or Walter Rummel, or a compound figure, could be the anguished clairvoyant.¹⁸ Another likely candidate is Richard Aldington, who in a letter written several years later recalled a Paris scene closely resembling the one in the poems. Writing H.D. from his army post on June 23, 1918, Aldington remarked: "That scene in Paris. I had almost forgotten, but now I remember it all so clearly, so plainly. Perhaps I exaggerated a little the odd sensation of Margaret's regret. Yet it was there, and

she was there—or seemed to be. One's nerves play these games, induce these hallucinations." And he goes on to compare this pre-war experience to a soldier's battle-weary imaginings.¹⁹

Taken together, the sonnets juxtapose, somewhat in diptych fashion, the reactions of men who were close to both Cravens and H.D. H.D. herself enters these poems obliquely, as a kind of intermediary between her friends and the dead woman, petitioning her to be as kind and gentle in death as in life ("I ask now seeking naught"). H.D. assumes the role of intercessor tremulously, as if uncertain how to characterize her relationship with Cravens yet wanting to record the depth of her sympathy and feeling of sisterhood. By the time of "Asphodel," she had sorted out this ambivalence and was in a position to dramatize it.

Ten years after completing "Asphodel," H.D. returned again to the story of Margaret Cravens, this time in remarks written for *The Cantos of Ezra Pound: Some Testimonies*, a volume of short essays by Hemingway, Ford, Joyce, and others. Most of the pieces are rather obvious puffs extolling an obscure poem in progress that had not yet been generally accepted or understood. H.D.'s testimony is different. Written in November 1932 at the time she was arranging for her "ps-a" work with Freud, it is a biographical palimpsest that proceeds by free association, recalling Pound before the first war in Philadelphia, London, and Paris—in H.D.'s own words "a very personal record of a very long time ago." For most of the essay, she reminisces rather archly about Pound's aggressive aesthete pose and the artificiality of his self-publicizing strategies. Suddenly she halts: "I am talking in the manner of the little old lady who actually did once see Shelley plain. And I myself did once see Ezra plain too." There follows an account of this rare moment of Ezra without his mask of anarchic bohemianism:

We were standing in the dark by an old bridge in Paris—that one I think that is just before the Ile de la Cité and the water was lapping underneath. We had just heard that a girl whom we all knew had very neatly shot herself through the heart. Ezra had been especially kind to her and she had told him of her neurosis and Ezra only of us knew that she slept with that beautiful little weapon under her pillow. None of us knew what to say: we were too shocked. She had been gay and kind and had wealth and opportunities and a beautiful apartment. . . . So I was saying goodbye, not knowing what else to say. But Ezra waved his affected stick somewhere towards it all in a vague helpless sort of manner. . . . He waved his somewhat

Whistlerish stick towards the river, the bridge, the lights, ourselves, all of us, all that we were and wanted to be and the thing that I wanted to say and couldn't say he said it before he dismissed me: 'And the morning stars sang together in glory'. . . .²⁰

His affected stick notwithstanding, here is Ezra relatively undisguised, reduced to a weary gesture and a phrase that seem to include all the dishevelled, wandering expatriates of Paris and London. H.D.'s contrasting inability to articulate a satisfactory farewell haunts her sonnets to "M.L.C." as well, and it is possible that the poem beginning "Our friend's friend," with its "wide / Dark passage between street & boulevard," is an early version of the nocturnal homage scene depicted in this testimony. In both cases, self-expression is revealed to be gender-related. Males discover a voice at need; women must struggle to do this and often remain voiceless despite their efforts. Cravens' suicide and H.D.'s silence in the presence of Pound may have been different responses to a similar experience of blockage.

H.D. came to believe that Margaret Cravens was an "authentic sister," a fellow expatriate and co-sufferer. When she first met her she envied her for having established an independent artistic existence abroad, something H.D. had not yet done. Cravens' suicide seemed to confirm her deepest fears, for here was a sensitive woman who had boldly torn up her American roots and transplanted them in Paris, yet who still could not escape the shadow of her oddness and in the end capitulated to it. H.D. also saw in Cravens a mirror-image of her own unresolved relationship with Pound. She always believed that he and Cravens had been romantically involved, even though the evidence for this is for the most part unconvincing. In "Asphodel," Hermione fears that Shirley Thornton has also been a victim of George Lowndes' irresponsible "kissing," that she has been kept, like Hermione, on the engagement string while George disported himself with others.

In 1948 H.D. wrote a series of letters to Bryher containing her "findings"—memories and psychological insights centering, quite often, on Pound in the years before World War I. New Directions had just published the *Pisan Cantos* with their elliptical record of Pound's internment on charges of treason, and H.D. was journeying back in time to discover where Ezra had gone wrong. In the course of this search she stumbled on Margaret Cravens, "the ONE person who I think would have brought out his best, and who in the beginning, DID bring out his best. All very private and spec on my part—but the girl who shot herself in Paris was I believe an old friend, not as E. rather implied, just one of a crowd."²¹ In her effort to make sense

of Pound's formative years and her own relation to him, H.D. had merged Cravens with Pound's early pianist friend/mentor, Katherine (Kitty) Heyman ("I met this Margaret, she was older, but only lately I seem to realize that she was the one who when E. was 16, brought him on. . . ."). There is something sad about this blending of the two women. H.D. had always tended to adapt Cravens to her dominant preoccupations, but now the urgent need to bring Ezra into focus was blurring her face even more. In the course of her memorial delvings, H.D. even persuaded herself that Cravens died from an overdose of pills.²²

H.D. encountered Margaret Cravens at a crucial point in her development, at the exact intersection of several personal crises, and found in the kind but troubled woman an objective correlative for her own internal confusion. Margaret came to figure in H.D.'s private martyrology as one of those gifted, sensitive women who were also endangered, easily crushed, like Joan of Arc. Though H.D. would never quite enjoy the sure indifference of the Venus de Milo, she did eventually acquire strength in a woman-identified relationship that largely carried her beyond the self-division she had experienced with Pound and Aldington. Lacking H.D.'s stamina and emotional resources, Margaret Cravens felt obliged to choose another way.

NOTES

1. "Autobiographical Notes" (unpublished manuscript). The author would like to thank Perdita Schaffner and the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, for permission to quote from "Autobiographical Notes" and from other unpublished material in H.D.'s papers. In reference to this incident with Pound, see also *ET* 8-9.
2. From a card postmarked 9 May 1912, published in "Selected Letters from H.D. to F.S. Flint: A Commentary on the Imagist Period," ed. Cyrena N. Pondrom, *Contemporary Literature* 10 (1969): 559.
3. "1912 Diary" (unpublished), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
4. From Margaret Cravens' final note to Walter Rummel, printed in *Ezra Pound and Margaret Cravens: A Tragic Friendship, 1910-1912*, eds. Omar Pound and Robert Spoo (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1988) 115. This essay is based in large part on material in this volume. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Gary Burnett for his generous advice about the H.D. material in the book. Omar Pound and I apologize for the inadvertent omission of his name from the acknowledgment section. We also wish to thank Caroline Zilboorg for her suggestions.
5. Barbara Guest claims that H.D. "moved to Aldington's hotel" (*HDG* 47), but I am not so sure. Though Aldington may have been staying in the rue des Ciseaux as well, a postcard from him to his father, dated May 20, 1912, was written from "12 Rue de la Grande Chaumière," a street not far from

the rue des Ciseaux. In another card home (June 2) he remarks, "I go up this little street [rue des Ciseaux] nearly every day after breakfast" (probably to collect H.D.), but says nothing about living there. (Unpublished postcards, Temple University Special Collections.)

6. "Asphodel," Part 1, 168. Unpublished typescript, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
7. "Asphodel," Part 1, 174.
8. "Asphodel," Part 1, 175.
9. Guest also suggests this in HDG 49-50.
10. Guest 190. Joan of Arc's feast day (hence deathday) is May 30, as H.D. noted in her 1912 diary. Cravens died on June 1, two days later. One of Joan of Arc's "voices" was St. Margaret, as H.D. points out in "Asphodel" and in "Joan of Arc," her review of *The Passion and Death of a Saint*, published in *Close-Up* 3 (July 1928). H.D. attacks the film for its relentless, "brutal" focus on Joan's agony to the exclusion of "our Jeanne," the Jeanne "of our subconscious."
11. From H.D.'s contribution to *The Cantos of Ezra Pound: Some Testimonies* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1933) 19. Newspaper accounts of the suicide also mentioned the June 2 tea party (e.g., *The Washington Post*, June 3, 1912).
12. "Asphodel," Part 1, 187.
13. See *Ezra Pound and Margaret Cravens* 114-16.
14. "Asphodel," Part 1, 189.
15. "Asphodel," Part 1, 190.
16. "Asphodel," Part 1, 193.
17. In "Asphodel" there is a scene in which George Lowndes behaves thoughtlessly towards Shirley Thornton in her apartment, to the embarrassment of Hermione and Darrington.
18. In *Ezra Pound and Margaret Cravens* I state confidently that the "he" of both poems is Walter Rummel. This may still be the case, but the situation seems less clear-cut to me now. See the discussion of the two sonnets (137-39).
19. Unpublished letter dated June 23, 1918, Beinecke Library.
20. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound: Some Testimonies*, 19.
21. Unpublished letter to Bryher of October 15, 1948, Beinecke Library. My thanks to Louis Silverstein and Adalaide Morris for bringing these "findings" letters to my attention.
22. Unpublished letter of October 17, 1948, Beinecke Library.